SUBTLE IS THE LORD

October 13, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Romans 1:16-20

> "Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." -- Romans 1:20 (RSV)

In Herman Wouk's recent autobiographical novel Inside-Outside, the narrator, DAVID GOODKIND, is drinking and talking with his old friendly protagonist, Mark. The conversation turns to religion. David is a devout Jew. Mark is not so devout.

In fact, Mark has just declared again that he doesn't believe much.

David says: "You don't believe? Not in anything?"

Mark says: "Believe? I know things. Not much. Not enough, but what I know, I know."

David asks: "What can you know about God?...You either believe or you don't."

"You're quite mistaken," said Mark..."You can know almost anything about God providing you put the right questions to him. God will answer a high school boy. He asks only that you use common sense, pay very close attention, not be sloppy, count and measure correctly. God ignores sloppy questions...God is exact. He is marvelously, purely exact." (p. 567)

There is a fascinating suggestion in that discourse; namely, that God may be known in the precision of science -- by asking the right questions; that the exactness of science, instead of ruling out the probability of God -- as we have been assuming for so long, actually points toward and bears witness to God.

Astronomy, for instance. Robert Jastrow, former Director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, NASA, and professor of Astronomy at both Columbia and Dartmouth, delivered a paper at a symposium at Yale several years ago under the title, Science and Creation. He began by confessing his agnosticism, but said he was fascinated with recent developments in astronomy partly because of the religious implications, and partly because of the peculiar reactions of his skeptical colleagues in the field of astronomy.

Listen for a moment to Jastrow's observations and, if you will, put them in conversation in your mind with the novelist's fascinating suggestion that you can know God if you ask the right questions: and then let the entire dialogue be informed and penetrated by a deceptively simple but stunning assertion St. Paul dropped into a discourse on the nature of God in the first chapter of

Romans. Paul wrote: "Ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, namely God's eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in what he has made."

First Jastrow. He said: "In a nutshell, the astronomers, studying the universe through their telescopes, have been forced to the conclusion that the world had a beginning. "Scientists," Jastrow explains, "have always been more comfortable with the idea of a universe that has existed forever... But the latest astronomical results indicate that at some time in the past the chain of cause and effect terminated abruptly. An important event occured -- the origin of the world -- for which there is no known cause or explanation within the realm of science."

Indulge your imagination and your curiosity a bit, and come with me to the observatory. Two discoveries have raised theological issues for the astronomers. First -- the expanding, or exploding, universe. Around 1914 astronomers first discovered that all the nebulae and galaxies within reach of their telescopes were speeding away from the earth at an incredible rate. They pondered that a bit, and because they were scientists, they knew that a receding or exploding universe means that at some point there was no universe. The measurable speed of those receding galaxies helped them determine that the explosion -- the moment of creation -- was twenty billion years ago, give or take two billion years. Science did not accept that discovery with much enthusiasm because it pointed to the unknown -- the ultimate mystery of creation which I believe six year olds understand perfectly clearly when they ask us with their singular innocence: "OK. Who created God?" Einstein was among those who only reluctantl accepted the "big bang" theory precisely because it pointed to what he called "a singularity in time," a moment of unexplained and unexplainable creation.

The second development is that the astronomers think they can hear that moment of creation. In 1965 astonomers at Bell Laboratories kept hearing an unexplained noise on their radio telescopes. They checked their equipment; they even looked for pigeons in the antenna. They listened some more; the hiss was coming from the entire 360° spectrum. Slowly, for reasons I can't begin to understand, they concluded that they were hearing the electronic noise generated at the instant of the birth of the universe.

Now this is not science fiction. This, to the best of my admitedly limited ability to understand it, is where the astronomers and theoretical physicists find the state of their science today. They are sounding more and more like religious mystics, some of them like prophets. Jastrow, the agnostic, talks about the "blank wall of mystery" behind which it doesn't seem we can ever expect to go. (from The Papers from the Symposium on Creation, the Arena of Prime Drama, Yale University, 1979)

Today we are living at the near end of several centuries of misunderstanding, hostility between religion and science. It began when Copernicus and Galileo taught science that conflicted with the way the church saw the world. The hostility deepened as science learned more and more about the world we live in and the church found itself threatened and unable to adapt. Science suggested that the earth revolved around the sun. The way the church read

the Bible, the sun revolves around the earth. The scientists suggested that the earth was round. But the Bible seems to believe that the earth is flat as a pancake, with a cup-like dome called a firmament holding the stars in place and keeping the sun and moon on course, and holding out the primal water, allowing in just enough to drink and water the plants.

The division deepened tragically. Both science and religion saw an opponent in each other. The fundamentalist -- modernist debates and, of course, the Scopes trial proved to each side that its stereotype of the other was true: scientists saw religionists as mindless, anti-intellectuals, trapped in superstition and ignorance. Religionists saw scientists as godless skeptics, destroyers of everything the civilization held dear. The conflict continues. Until a few weeks ago, high school textbook publishers in California had to give space in science books to creationism. Creationism maintains that the Genesis account of creation is, in fact, a scientific description, incompatible with what science has come to know as the process of evolution. The good news is that the provision was struck down. Textbook publishers are free to teach science without religious censorship. I am convinced that we are seeing the closing of the gap between religion and science. I am convinced that God is not threatened by the pursuit of truth.

I am convinced that in God's scheme of things the skeptics, agnostics and even the atheists have a role to play. They keep us on our toes -- theologically and sometimes ethically. Sometimes religious people are so sure of themselves they are inclined to lose the ability to hear anyone else speaking. The agnostics remind us that religion, by definition, is about that which is larger than our humanity, including our human capacity to understand...And as we ponder that we meet the scientists coming from the opposite direction, pursuing the unknown -- right up to the blank wall of mystery where all of us are agnostics because we can know no more.

Of course the healing is not complete. The creationists keep wanting us to learn our science from the Bible -- which is not only very bad science, but also a tragic misuse of scripture. The Book of Genesis contains deep, profound, life saving truth, particularly when we free it from the responsibility of teaching us botany, zoology, anthropolgy. "In the beginning, God created..." Genesis announced.

Albert Einstein was a deist, not in a traditional religious sense, but his biographers conclude that a theology of God as designer of the amazing laws and systems by which the world operates was important to him. One biographer borrowed for a book title, and I have appropriated as sermon title, something Einstein once said on the subject. "Subtle is the Lord, but malicious he is not." He wrote once, "A legitimate conflict between science and religion cannot exist. Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind." (See Subtle is the Lord, the Science and Life of Albert Einstein, Abraham Pais)

What the Bible says first about creation is that God is the Creator. The first word is one of wonder and amazement, akin to what each of us has felt in the presence of wonderful natural phenomena...sunsets and sunrises at the ocean or over Lake Michigan, strong mountains and tall silent trees, the gorgeous smells of each season and the feel of garden dirt in our hands. We know in

those experiences the mystery of being, what the philosopher Wittgenstein expressed this way: "It is not how the world is that is mystical, but that it is at all."

Dr. Lewis Thomas, of the Sloane Kettering Clinic, speaks a prophetic word that religion needs to hear from the perspective of his scientific specialty, micro-biology. Writing about all the public interest several years ago around conception in a lab dish, Thomas writes, "For real amazement, if you want to be amazed, is the process itself. You start out as a single cell derived from the coupling of a sperm and an egg...the mere existence of that cell should be one of the great astonishments of the earth. People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing but that cell." (The Medussa and the Snail, p. 130)

That is the elemental religious impulse -- that wonder at my own being. D. H. Lawrence wrote a poem about it using heavily theological language. The name of the poem is The Wild Common.

> "...how splendid it is to be substance here!...
> all that is right, all that is good;
> all that is God takes substance!...
> In confirmation, I hear sevenfold lark-songs pealing."
> (Selected Poems, pp. 26-27)

The Bible points to the fundamental mystery of life: the sheer astonishing fact that we are...This basic religious impulse may have been easier to experience in the past when people lived closer to the natural world and held the good earth in their hands with regularity. We are well-removed from elemental things. We are urban. "Roughing it" means putting on an L. L. Bean Flannel Shirt to walk to the drugstore. The society we live in is obsessive about sanitizing the natural with deoderants and cosmetics, and in the process somehow turns the gift of secuality into leering pornography, and so insulates us from both birth and death that most people see neither. Our alienation from creation is expressed in the traditional view of wilderness as a place of foreboding, full of danger. That is a theological issue at heart. It may be too late to learn that wolves, for instance, never approached the fearful character human imagination assigned them. It may be too late for them, for the whales, the eagles, the tigers. Our only option may be to try to remember what the fullness of God's creation used to be like.

The Biblical position is that God is the Creator; that creation is God's and that it is good. Ancient Eastern religion generally regarded the world as evil. In the context of human history, with all its stumbling and tragedy, the Biblical statement, "God saw what he had made and it was good," is absolutely stunning. Even in the face of human sin creation is good; humanity is good; our physical humanness is intended by God and loved by God and celebrated by God.

But the Bible holds out for more than this elemental deism which acknowledges the existence of God as Creator. God, the mysterious source of all being, the unseen creator, is more than a principle. This God relates personally to what he has created. The Hebrew word translated "create" can also, in most instances -- I am told -- be translated in the present-perfect tense -- "creating." God is still at it. God has not yet finished creating the world.

In an even more immediate sense God is not yet finished with the process of creating you and me. You are not yet what you can be.

And because of that there is no need, no emptiness, as real as ours -- for God. There is no hunger and thirst as real as ours for a relationship with the living God who created us. From the first page to the last the Bible points to a God who not only conceives the world, imagines it, fashions it and births it, but a God who relates to the world, a God who continues the mysterious process of creating and who loves the world and each of its people so much that he acts to give fullness of life, joy, salvation, by being intimately a part of it.

That is our deepest need, ultimately. When I hurt, is there anyone who cares? When I'm frightened, is there comfort? When I'm alienated, cut off from my spouse, my children, my friends, even from myself, when I feel wretchedly out of sync with the whole universe, is there a healing balm, a reconciling, forgiving power, to save me? When I have to say good-bye, and let go of all that is precious: my dearest loves, my life itself, is there anything there but the darkness? Is there anybody there except the electronic hiss?

On the subject of creation the most astonishing thing the Bible says, and the most profound thing we believe, is that the subtle Lord of creation, became part of the creation. The heart of the matter is that in the fullness of time, God dwelt among us. The ancient, mysterious word became flesh; Jesus the Christ was born and lived and died as part of the magnificent drama of creation. And that is both a mystery more profound than anything the astronomers have confronted and a love deeper than anything we can imagine.

"How splendid to be substance," the poet declared. In Christ, we are invited to affirm and to love the creation, the world our home, the miracle of our lives and the greater miracle of the lives of those we love and who love us. In Christ we are invited to trust the magnificant God of creation: the God who so loves it all, and so loves us each, to send a son to be part of it, to live in it and die for it. We are invited, not to better science, but to stronger trust in that God, whose love will not let us go.

"From the beginning," St. Paul wrote, "God has been perceived in the things that have been made," including...and supremely, his Son, Jesus Christ, who is our Lord. Amen.

Let us Pray:

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor to you, our God, for ever and ever...

Praise to you for the magnificence of the created order.

Glory to you for life; mysterious, rich, abundant...

Thanksgiving to you for human love and friendship, for aspiration and joy and passion.

Honor to you our God, for Jesus Christ -- who lived among us and died for us -- and in whom we continue to know you and your love for us.

Amen